

Date: Mon, 12 Nov 2001 17:13:49 -0800
Subject: Fwd: proposal
Sender: pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu
To: varmus@mskcc.org
From: pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu

Hi Harold,

Thanks for taking the time to chat on Friday.

Very thoughtful comments from Vivian Siegel. All the more reason that we need to get serious about fund-raising. I'm going to be in Memphis at a St. Jude's SAB mtg., but I'll try to be in touch by email.

Pat

Date: Mon, 12 Nov 2001 07:32:59 -0800 (PST)
From: Vivian Siegel <vivian_siegel@yahoo.com>
Subject: proposal
To: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>

Hi Pat,

I took a quick look at the proposal, and I had a few immediate reactions:

the organization of the group of journals as a premier journal in biology and a premier journal in medicine and then a number of more specialized sister or daughter journals, with authors submitting either to individual journals or to the group, reminds me very much of the organization of Cell Press itself (although with a broader scope), and so I do have a little experience with authors on this sort of "clearinghouse" concept and can give you some feedback. First, I don't think it works to launch the system as a whole - you really need the pull of the premier titles to feed the other journals, and the premier titles need at least a couple of years to establish themselves (I think). Second, you need to give the authors free reign to decide where they want to publish. They should be able to submit to the premier journal only, and withdraw the manuscript if publication there is not considered appropriate. There will be some authors who subscribe wholeheartedly to the PLOS concept and will publish at whatever level is deemed fit, but there will also be plenty who would prefer to try their hand at another high profile journal first, and they should be allowed to do so. Everything should be thought of in terms of what is in the best interest of the authors (at least that's the way we try to do it at Cell).

The staffing level you are proposing seems absurdly low to me. Let me give you some numbers from this end. We say that we need an editorial assistant for every 100 new manuscripts submitted a month. An experienced copy editor can handle 2-3 manuscripts a week. Also, from the structure, it seems you are proposing to have academic editors decide the fate of the individual papers, and have an editorial manager oversee

everything. I don't think that's a good plan. This is actually the structure (with a little less in-house support) for the most mediocre of Elsevier Science titles). At the very least, with an academic team of editors, you should have 1 highly trained in house scientific editor per journal.

I am of course just guessing at your plans from the budget, but it seems to me a lot more thought needs to go into the journals themselves. You suggested on the phone that what you really want to focus on is the editorial quality, but I don't see any attention to that in the proposal itself. I'm not saying that you need to go the "professional editor" route of Nature, Science, and Cell but I do think you need to have the same sort of time commitment if the PLOS journals are to succeed. As a comparison, at Cell Press, for a journal that receives 100 new manuscripts a month and has reviews and commentaries, presubmission inquiries, and editors attending meetings, we currently budget 5 full time editors (i.e. 1000 editorial hours!). That seems like a lot, doesn't it, but in fact it is probably still an underestimate (editors work longer hours than I estimate). If you had all experienced editors, and the structure of the business was such that the focus was entirely on editorial matters, you could probably cut that number to 3-4 full time editor-equivalents, but that's still probably a lot more than you were thinking. If you are going to "run" the journal with academic editors, they should be prepared to make a similar time commitment if they really want to create the best journal around.

Also, I know you want to focus on editorial quality, which is great, but an online-only journal should certainly be more than the individual papers, and there should be some attention paid to that. If Ben Lewin's current operation is anything to model PLOS against, he has 5 full time scientists and 5 designers and developers working just on the textbook operation. You need a core of people really focused on this to get it off the ground (i.e., not just people carving away a few hours a week from an already overburdened schedule to help). I think the "business" should have the buzz of a brand-new and for-the-public-good undertaking, and that all of the hired staff should be particularly committed to making the PLOS publishing group succeed. For that reason, you might think about whether you want the group to be staffed from within the scientific community (including tasks like editorial assistant and copy editor), as opposed to with people who consider this 'just another job'. Journals do run in large part on volunteers (who write and review and even act as editors for free) - I have been musing a bit about whether PLOS could run more officially as a volunteer organization, but haven't really thought too hard about that yet.

A balanced budget. I do not really understand, if one goal is to create a business model that other nonprofits might follow, you would want essentially

all the business costs to be underwritten by a group of benefactors. It really should be a break-even budget, including the salaries of the staff and housing costs, etc. For that reason, I just don't understand the \$300 per paper (submitted? published?) model. Shouldn't you really think about how much it costs to handle a manuscript and plan a pricing scheme accordingly? I have just looked at the numbers for Cell itself and the cost per submitted paper is something like \$2000 (very rough). If we price per published paper, it goes to \$8000! I completely believe that there is a lot of waste that comes from being part of a corporate superstructure that could be eliminated, but there is no way you will ever get the cost into the \$300-\$500 range, with room left over to subsidize those who can't afford to pay. I'm not entirely sure why you want to. Those who have spoken to me about a pay-to-submit plan all agree that the cost of doing research is so high that tacking on a publication fee in the (few) thousand dollar range seems entirely appropriate.

I hope this is of some help - I would be glad to talk further about this, including my own potential involvement, at any time.

All the best,
Vivian

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